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How the Marine Corps Could Better Handle IAs
CI Paper Thesis and Outline
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Introduction

A GAO report states, "All pilot candidates must complete basic flight training, lasting one to two years, to earn their initial qualifications, or wings. According to DOD, the cost to train each military pilot through basic flight training is about one million dollars; the cost to fully train a pilot with the requisite operational experience can be more than nine million dollars."¹ For the Marine Corps to invest nine million dollars in a pilot only to send him/her on a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) directed individual augmentee (IA) billet is a waste of resources. This has happened many times at the most critical point in a pilot's career. The Marine Corps must change the way these IA's are being assigned to aviators because of the effects these billets have on pilots' training, qualifications, career progression, and fleet readiness. I believe that if the Marine Corps would adopt a similar program and attitude the Navy has, these negative factors and perspectives would change significantly.

Background

¹ United States General Accounting Office. Report to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives. GAO/NSIAD-99-211, 1999.

To understand the implications of poorly timed IA billets one must first understand the progression of a young fleet aviator in a squadron. From start to finish training takes up to three years to make an aviator. For an FA-18 pilot, training can take even longer and cost more. Three years and nine million dollars is a lot to invest into an individual before he/she even begins to serve pay back tours in the fleet.

Once an aviator checks into his fleet squadron he/she is a fairly well trained pilot but not a pilot trained in the current tactics of his/her platform. The first year in the squadron, however, is dedicated to developing the young aviator into a professional pilot. He/she will be a wingman for a year or two before he/she are selected to become a section leader. This marks a new point in the aviator's professional development and allows him/her to become a leader and trainer of other younger aviators in the squadron.

Once designated a section leader, a pilot will gain proficiency leading two aircraft into various tactical and operations sorties. A pilot will typically stay a section lead for one year before he/she is then selected to gain further training. This training consists of becoming an air combat tactics instructor ACTI and/or a leader of four

aircraft, i.e, a division leader. To achieve this, lots of time and energy is invested by both the squadron and the individual. An FA-18 pilot is typically nearing his/her two to two and one-half year mark in the squadron by this point. These two qualifications are what pilot's rate and must have to become competitive and professional aviators. The FA-18 community currently looks down on pilots who were unsuccessful in getting these qualifications in their first fleet tour.

Current IA Program

The Commandant of the Marine Corps has stated that IA's are not going away anytime soon. The MEF has also shown signs that it will not eliminate its requirement to fill internal IA's either. Most IA's brought to the Marine air group are directed by the Marine air wing or Marine expeditionary force. The Marine air group then tasks the squadron commanders to fill the IA billets with the required captain or major. Once selected, that IA will depart on their tour with temporary active duty orders to the associated Marine air wing or Marine expeditionary force for tasking. These TAD orders can range from 180 to 365 days.

Shortfalls

Currently no set oversight organization exists within the Marine Corps to track these individuals. Many times, the parent command assumes responsibility but has little to no control over where these individuals go. Often once an IA is pulled from his/her squadron he/she is sent out with little to no guidance as to where he/she is going or what he/she is doing. Individuals can be pulled from squadrons with orders to leave three days later. A pilot the author knew was told he would be leaving on an IA billet a week later for one year.² One weeks notice is a complete failure in leadership and organization. Telling Marines they will be leaving to a combat zone for one year and giving him/her a week to prepare is unsatisfactory.

Pre-deployment training often does not prepare the individual for what he/she will really be doing. In one case the author knew an IA who went to theater and was told to fill a job he was completely not assigned to do.³ Some individuals arrived only to be told they were not needed. This lack of organization causes a lot of frustration and animosity. Consequently, the term "IA" carries a very negative connotation among aviators, which is exacerbated

² Sprietsma, Charley. Interview by author. Phone. Beaufort, December 10, 2008.

³ Armstrong, Larcell. Interview by author. Phone. Pensacola, December 11, 2008.

by the fact that pilots are torn from their squadron at the worst possible time in their development as professional aviators.

Selection of these individuals is left completely to the commanders. They have the burden of choosing the right person for the job, typically someone who met the needs of the Marine Corps, and/or would not hinder the squadron's ability to accomplish the mission. In turn, pilots who were new to the group, lacking certain qualifications, or disliked by the senior leadership were selected to fill these billets. Also, IA Marines have a feeling of being forgotten by their old command. Sometimes IA's would return with no command welcoming party and no support from the Marines old command.

Finally, IA's are counted as time in the squadron. Being an IA does not stop or reset time in the squadron. If one leaves for six months he/she does not get six months back at home. Also, the time as an IA does not count as time out of the cockpit, a bone of contention among many IA's in the Marine Corps. This means an IA cannot extend six months in a squadron to make up for the time spent on his/her IA tour, thereby shortening his/her time to train.

Exceptions

Despite the negatives of being selected for an IA billet some positives exist. Many IA's have found that they learned new things on their deployment. The author learned the value of working with a sister service. Most fill rewarding jobs, yet some feel overqualified for their duty. IA duty can put a Marine in a joint environment forcing him to learn how another organization operates. It can also make an individual work outside of his/her comfort zone, ultimately making the Marine a better professional.

Changes

Nevertheless the Marine Corps should take a hard look at how they are deploying, training, and selecting IA's. The Navy has experienced these same issues. In October 2006 the Navy stood up the Naval Expeditionary Combat Readiness Center (ECRC).⁴ It serves as a single source provider for "oversight to ensure effective processing, equipping, training, certification, deployment, reach-back, redeployment, and proactive family support of combat-trained Navy individual augmentees (IA)..."⁵ The Navy also stood up the Task Force Individual Augments (TFIA) to examine their IA process. The TFIA worked to improve the

⁴ "Forgotten Sailors Back on Radar in Improved IA Plan". Navy Times 21 January 2008..

⁵ Worthly, Alan. "US Navy Individual Augmentee Program: Is it the Correct Approach to GWOT service?"

sourcing, notification, training, and family readiness of IA sailors. The ECRC also provides deployment checklists and spouse programs.⁶ All these functions are provided to some but not all IA Marines. The Marine Corps currently has no organization to provide these services. Instead, the Corps relies on an already over tasked S-1 (administrative) shop to support these IA's. This causes many pay conflicts, and families are left with little to no information or notification.

In July of 2007, the Chief of Naval Personnel, VADM John Harvey announced the Global War on Terrorism Support Assignment (GSA) detailing system. It changed the IA program from the "normal short notice, mid-tour, temporary duty, individual augmentee assignments, to a norm of permanent change of station, GWOT support assignments negotiated in the Sailors normal detailing window".⁷ The goal of the program is to "improve predictability for Sailors and their families, enable volunteerism, improve stability at the unit level, and add greater detailer [or monitor] oversight for professional development and career progression".⁸

⁶ "TFIA Continues Work to Improve IA Process". Navy News 25 January 2007.

⁷ "New IA perks". Navy News 11 September 2006.

⁸ "New IA perks". Navy News 11 September 2006.

The GSA system assigns IA billets at a Sailor's rotation date. That means a Marine could volunteer or except an IA of his/her choosing when nearing his/her rotation date. If the Marine Corps would interject monitors into its IA system, the Marine Corps could allow for that time to count as a B-billet or out of cockpit tour. The PCS orders change would allow a Marine to move his/her family to his/her current location if so desired.

The ECRC also allows for information to flow to a central point. This means Marines would get timely and accurate information. Numbers and emergency contact information would not be lost or confused, little confusion would exist as to who is responsible for that Marine. The training for deployment of a Marine would be the responsibility of the ECRC. According to Master Chief James Stone, head GSA enlisted detailer, "The feedback from Sailors I have detailed has been positive so far. They choose where and when they go, and it helps commands because they do not have to choose what Sailors they are going to send."⁹

Conclusion

⁹ Yager, Maria. "GWOT Support Assignments Give Sailors More Options." Navy News 8 November 2007

IA's are perceived as negative to many Marines. The poor timing, lack of perceived concern from higher, and the negative effect an IA billet has on a Marine's career path are all significant concerns among Marines. If the Marine Corps would adopt a similar program and attitude as the Navy, these negative perspectives would change significantly.

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